

# The Rambler Writes of Corcoran Gallery of Art

IN his narrative of the Corcoran mansion, at the northeast corner of Connecticut avenue and H street, the Rambler ended the third chapter last Sunday by saying that "he hopes before closing this series to follow Mr. Corcoran into that period of life when he became a rich man, and to tell something of the beautiful story of the Louise Home and to touch on the inception and distinguished development of the Corcoran Gallery of Art." Quoting Mr. Corcoran's own story of his business career, it was written last Sunday that in 1837 he removed from Georgetown to Washington and opened a brokerage office in a small storeroom on the north side of Pennsylvania avenue near 15th street. The site of that store and a number of other lots became the site of the Corcoran building, which for many years was perhaps the largest office building in the city. The site of the building is now occupied by the Washington Hotel. Mr. Corcoran tells in his memoir, "A Grandfather's Legacy," that his brokerage business in the little store was eminently successful and that in 1839 he removed to the Bank of the Metropolis building, northeast corner of 15th and F streets, and that in 1840 he took into partnership George W. Riggs, continuing the business under the firm name of Corcoran & Riggs.

In 1845 this firm purchased the old United States Bank, at the northwest corner of 15th street and Pennsylvania avenue, together with all its property and "effects uncollected." The character of the business of the firm had gradually changed, and while in 1837 Mr. Corcoran had been known as a broker, he soon came to be known as a banker, and in 1840 the firm of Corcoran & Riggs was a banking rather than a brokerage firm. One narrative goes that about 1847 the firm, on its own account, took nearly all the loans made by the United States.

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In 1848 George W. Riggs retired from the firm and was succeeded by his younger brother, Elisha. During that year the firm had on hand about \$12,000,000 of the 6 per cent United States bonds of 1848, and the demand for them falling off in the United States, Mr. Corcoran sailed for Europe to endeavor to place the bonds there. After much discouragement he succeeded in placing \$5,000,000 with Baring Bros. & Co.; George Peabody, Overend, Gurney & Co.; Denison & Co., Samuel Jones Lloyd and James Morrison, this being the first sale of American government securities made in Europe since 1837. The success of the operation gradually advanced the bonds to 119½, thus securing a very handsome profit for the firm of Corcoran & Riggs. On April 1, 1854, Mr. Corcoran withdrew from the firm and the business was continued under the name of Riggs & Co., which name was changed in 1856. In that year the banking house of Riggs & Co. became the Riggs National Bank.

The foregoing facts were gathered from a sketch of Mr. Corcoran published in 1897 in the report of a "joint select committee" to investigate the charities and reformatory institutions in the District of Columbia. The man who wrote that sketch for incorporation in the report obtained some of the facts from "A Grandfather's Legacy," which Mr. Corcoran wrote and dedicated to his grandchildren in 1878. On the day of the death of Mr. Corcoran, Friday, February 24, 1883, The Evening Star published a biography of Mr. Corcoran containing many facts not given in the report referred to, and it also contained a number of statements at variance with statements in the congressional report. From internal evidence and from bits of information which have come to the Rambler, and facts of his own knowledge, he believes that The Star's sketch of Mr. Corcoran was accurate. Turning to the file of The Star for 1883, the Rambler reproduces parts of that biography of Mr. Corcoran:

Mr. Corcoran's excellent qualifications for business attracted the notice of Gen. John Mason, president of the Bank of Georgetown, and after the failure referred to the dry goods firm of W. W. Corcoran & Co., in Georgetown, in 1826, Gen. Mason gave him a place in his bank as a clerk. After three years there Mr. Corcoran entered the service of the branch bank of the United States, then located opposite the Treasury. His labors there brought him in contact with many officials of the government and other prominent men, and he gained their respect and confidence. When the Bank of Georgetown suspended Mr. Corcoran was commissioned by the government to dispose of the real estate held by the bank, and which, as the creditor of the bank, the United States was obliged to take in satisfaction of its claims. Mr. Corcoran subsequently opened a modest brokerage and banking establishment and in 1827 formed the banking house of Corcoran & Riggs, his partner, George W. Riggs, being a son of Elisha Riggs, the partner of George Peabody. Mr. Corcoran's business methods and his fine manners and appearance won the confidence of Elisha Riggs, who contributed capital to the new banking concern.

W. W. Corcoran Probably Began Buying Good Pictures in the '40s, With the Idea of a Public Collection—When Ground Was Broken for the Gallery—A Letter Describing Gallery Written in 1874.



THE FIRST CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART.

In the matter of the firm's participation in government financing, The Star said:

In 1841, when the government was embarrassed financially, its income being insufficient for its needs, Walter Forward, then Secretary of the Treasury, attempted to negotiate a loan abroad, but failed. In this crisis Messrs. Corcoran and Riggs, through Daniel Webster, then Secretary of State, offered to take a government loan of \$5,000,000 at 101. This proposition was accepted and the daring venture, which astounded the bankers of the country, proved successful. If it had been otherwise the whole capital of the young firm would have been swept away. The transaction was profitable and it enabled Corcoran and Riggs to establish a credit at home and abroad that was never shaken in the most calamitous times. This operation also laid the foundation of the large fortune which Mr. Corcoran acquired and which he has administered largely as though it were a trust placed in his hands for the benefit of his fellow men.

Upon the outbreak of the Mexican war, in 1846, Robert J. Walker, then Secretary of the Treasury, gave to Mr. Corcoran the government loans to negotiate. Mr. Corcoran went to London, upon what was believed by many to be a hopeless mission. Several states had repudiated their debts and American securities were generally regarded with doubt and suspicion in European financial circles. Mr. Corcoran was warmly welcomed by George Peabody and the Baring, the great bankers of London. Mr. Corcoran's manners and financial knowledge gained the confidence of these gentlemen, and through them he was enabled to place a loan of \$10,000,000 in the London market. Upon his return from this audacious and patriotic mission, which by reason of Mr. Corcoran's tact, skill and personal influence resulted so successfully, he was honored an aviator and hailed as the fortress of American credit. Mr. Corcoran after this made large and fortunate investments in Washington real estate. At the auction of 30,000 lots, acquired by the government in the division of the city lands, Mr. Corcoran was a large purchaser. He also bought several farms about the city, one of which, known as Trinidad, now a very valuable tract, he gave a few years ago to Columbian (George Washington) University. Another, Harewood, was sold a few years ago for \$200,000, the money being turned over to the Corcoran Art Gallery.

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Harewood, which had been the White farm and later the Brackenridge farm, is now the southern part of the Soldiers Home grounds. For a number of years Mr. Corcoran used it as his summer home, and his cottage is still standing. The last time the Rambler was out that way the cottage was the home of the chief dairyman of the Soldiers Home and his family.

The Rambler does not know in what year Mr. Corcoran seriously turned his attention to the collection of paintings and statuary and the encouragement of art and artists. He probably began buying good pictures in the '40s. When he had gathered together a considerable number of paintings in the house on H street, he often talked over with his close friends his purpose to give them to a public gallery of art, and later he evolved the plan of founding a gallery for the public good. This idea had taken form before 1859, for in that year he began the construction at the northeast corner of Pennsylvania avenue and 17th street of the ornate red brick building, which became the Corcoran Gallery of Art. The

building had not been finished at the breaking out of the civil war. It was taken over by the government and became, and remained for several years after the war, the quartermaster general's office.

Early in the civil war Mr. Corcoran went to Europe, preferring, it was said, a residence abroad during his later years to remaining in this country during the period of civil strife. His departure was construed by the very bitter and uncompromising northern element in Washington as an expression of disfavor toward the Union cause. In many ways Mr. Corcoran's attachments were southern. His daughter, Louise Morris Corcoran, was the wife of George Eustis, at one time a representative in Congress from Louisiana, and whose father, George Eustis, had held many civil offices under that state, at length becoming chief justice of the supreme court of Louisiana. George Eustis, sr., died in New Orleans, December 22, 1858, aged sixty-two. He was the eldest son of Jacob and Elizabeth (Gray) Eustis of Massachusetts, and was born in Boston, October 20, 1796. His son, George, who married Miss Corcoran, was appointed by the confederacy as secretary of legation at the same time John Slidell was appointed minister to France. After the close of the war Mr. Eustis continued his residence in France, and died at his villa at Cannes, March 15, 1872. There are certain thoughts along these lines which the Rambler will develop at another sitting.

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It was in 1869, ten years after the beginning of the building at 17th and the Avenue, that the Corcoran Gallery of Art was created. On May 15, 1869, the following gentlemen met by invitation of Mr. Corcoran in his library in the H street house: J. M. Carlisle, Dr. James C. Hall, George W. Riggs, Anthony Hyde, James G. Berret, James C. Kennedy, Henry D. Cooke and James C. McGuire of Washington and W. T. Walters of Baltimore. The meeting took place at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Mr. Corcoran handed to Mr. Carlisle a letter and Mr. Carlisle called on Mr. Hyde to read it. This letter should be of interest to all Washingtonians, and to persons everywhere who are interested in art. It follows:

WASHINGTON, May 10, 1869.

Gentlemen: It is known to you that the building at the northeast corner of Pennsylvania avenue and 17th street northwest was designed by me for the encouragement of the fine arts, as is indicated by the dedication upon its front.

The work was begun in the year 1859 and was prosecuted with the heartiness naturally incident to such an undertaking until it was interrupted by the breaking out of the late civil war, when the public exigencies led to the immediate occupation of the building for military purposes, and to these uses it has been devoted ever since, until, being no longer required by the War Department, it is about to be restored to my possession.

It was my cherished purpose to have placed the proposed establishment, complete in all its appointments, in successful operation before divesting myself of the title by any formal instrument, but the years which have

thus passed away and the accumulation of other cares and duties warn me no longer to indulge the pleasing anticipation.

I have, therefore, not doubting your general interest in the subject, taken the liberty of executing to you, as trustees, a deed, which I herewith deliver, sufficiently defining the trusts which I ask you to accept.

In addition to the title to the property itself you will observe that the instrument vests in you for the purposes of the trust the right to receive the rents, wholly unpaid, for the period during which it has been occupied by the government, now nearly eight years, which will doubtless be adjusted with you in the absence of any special agreement on fair and perhaps liberal terms.

As soon as the interior of the building shall have been completed according to the original plans (which will be placed at your disposal), for which the rents in arrears will more than suffice, I shall ask you to receive as a nucleus my own gallery of art, which has been collected at no inconsiderable pains, and I have assurances from friends in other cities, whose tastes and liberality have taken this direction, that they will contribute fine works of art from their respective collections.

I may add that it is my intention to provide further endowment of the institution in such manner and to such extent as may be consistent with other objects which claim my attention, and I venture to hope that with your kind co-operation and judicious management we shall have provided at no distant day not only a pure and refined pleasure for residents and visitors of the National Metropolis, but have accomplished something useful in the development of American genius.

I am gentlemen, with great respect and regard,

Your Obedient Servant,  
W. W. CORCORAN.

After the reading of Mr. Corcoran's letter Mr. Carlisle handed to Mr. Corcoran the letter, which follows:

WASHINGTON, D. C., May 10, 1869.

To Wm. W. Corcoran, Esq.  
Dear Sir: We have accepted the trusts confided to us by your deed of this date in the formal manner indicated by the deed itself.

But we desire individually and collectively to add the expression of our personal appreciation of the privilege of endeavoring efficiently to administer such an institution projected spontaneously by your liberal mind and securely founded by your munificence.

While we cannot doubt that, at least in the time of our successors, all your anticipations will be realized, we sincerely hope that you may yourself live to enjoy the high and pure gratification of witnessing the complete success of your generous intentions.

With great respect and warm regard,  
We remain very truly yours.

The letter was signed by all those mentioned as being present in Mr. Corcoran's library.

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The deed to the trustees was recorded May 18, 1869, and may be found in Liber D, No. 8, folio 294 et seq., of the land records of Washington. An act of Congress incorporating the trustees of the Corcoran Gallery of Art "and for other purposes," was approved May 24, 1870. The Rambler has before him what he believes to be the first catalogue of the gallery, and thus showing the paintings and statuary which constituted the original Corcoran collection, but of this, at another time.

Lying at the hand of the Rambler is a clipping from the Jamestown, N. Y., Journal. It was written, and well written, by a lady whose friendship

the Rambler esteems and hopes to merit. She tells the story of the Corcoran Art Gallery soon after its opening. This lady came to Washington in 1871. She was then a little slip of a girl. She married the son of a fine man, of whom at his death it was written: "The most striking characteristic of his nature was its quality of being so well rounded that he was successful in the realms of business, of intellect, of aesthetics. His taste for literature was pronounced, his inclination toward art still more so. Travel had set its stamp of wide tolerance upon him. His work as trustee and president of the Corcoran Gallery of Art has been a large contributory cause to the art knowledge of the capital and of the nation." The husband of the lady of whom the Rambler is now thinking is also a trustee of the great gallery, and following is the little story she wrote to the folk back home:

WASHINGTON, D. C.

February 6, 1874.

Dear Journal: The people of this city have lately received from the munificent hand of Mr. W. W. Corcoran a most delightful gift in the shape of an art gallery—a gift whose value is not merely for the present, but which will remain with us and increase from year to year. This is only one of the many public benefactions which Mr. Corcoran has bestowed upon the city, but it is perhaps the one which will be the most thoroughly appreciated and enjoyed by all. The building which has been erected for this purpose is situated on the corner of Pennsylvania avenue and 17th street. It is of brick and brown stone combined and is one of the most beautiful and symmetrical edifices in the city. There is but one entrance opening into the main hall, or vestibule, which contains the grand marble staircase. Doors on either side of the stairs open into saloons which are to receive the sculpture, vases, casts, etc. Passing to the left and through the office of the trustees and superintendent, the visitor enters the first saloon, the only one on this floor which contains anything at present. Here the most prominent objects are four vases, each in its way an exquisite specimen of art. The first is of majolica ware, or faience, and is four feet in height. It is mounted on a pedestal of American walnut and is covered with designs of peacocks, foliage and flowers, both delicate and gorgeous. The other vases are very beautiful specimens of French painting on porcelain and the designs are of cupids, fawns, flowers, etc. In the middle of this room is a valuable collection of the bronzes of Bayre, the celebrated models of animals and reptiles at the Jardin des Plantes, Paris. None of these bronzes exceed two and a half feet in length, while many are only a few inches high. The variety of these figures is astonishing. Here are bears, lions, tigers, crocodiles, a dying stag beset by hounds, horses, eagles, dogs and, in fact, almost every form of animal life is represented with marvelous skill. In the same room is the famous Hildesheim collection of Roman antiquities, discovered in Saxony and reproduced in France. The domestic utensils are of perfectly symmetrical form and ornamented in the most artistic style. The vessels are of silver, and on some the figures stand out in such bold relief, as to seem almost detached from the main surface. Among these trophies is a huge German drinking flagon of the eleventh century, which was disintegrated with the other relics. A life-size bust of Commodore Morris completes the collection in this room.

The great hall of sculpture, which is empty at present, is also situated on the ground floor. It is one hundred feet in length and is admirably adapted to the display of sculpture and statuary, which it will in time be filled. The copies of the well-known Elgin marbles, which are intended to adorn this noble apartment, have recently arrived in New York, from whence they will be shipped directly to Washington, and we may hope to behold, ere long, these exact reproductions of the wonderful bas-reliefs with which Phidias and his pupils adorned the pediment of the Parthenon. Returning now to the front door, by which we entered, we observe on each side of the stairway a bust mounted on a pillar of Scotch granite. That on the left, of colonial size, is a marble Napoleon by Canova, copied from his celebrated statue in the Brera Gallery at Milan, where the King of Italy is represented as Mercury, holding a scepter in his hand. Out of the block of marble taken from under the outstretched arm of the statue Canova chiseled the "Venus Victrix," one of the chief Venuses of the world, for which the beautiful Pauline Bonaparte did not object to be modeled, "because," as she remarked to an astonished friend, "the room was so delightfully warm." The bust opposite Napoleon I is of Alexander von Humboldt and was modeled for Mr. Corcoran by Rauch, the greatest of German sculptors. Humboldt, while Prussian minister at Rome, was a patron of Rauch, who was at that time studying his art in the Eternal city, and who afterward became an intimate friend of the great baron. The face is kindly, pleasing and thoughtful. Every line in the piece of sculpture in the collection. Before us now is the grand staircase leading to the great gallery of paintings, which contains much more of interest than the room we have already visited. As we have already consumed too much time and space in examining the ground floor, we will reserve the description of the paintings until some future occasion.